

# THE PROBLEM OF THE LARGE LODGE

*The problem of the large lodge is one with which many Grand Masters have had to contend during the past year and more because of the hundreds of young men knocking at our doors who were eager to receive their degrees before leaving for overseas to teach the Hun his lesson. Many of the larger lodges found it necessary to hold meetings for work nearly every day in the week in order to keep their trestle boards partly cleared for other work in prospect. The larger the lodge the more numerous grew the applications at each regular communication, and in addition to having to take care of their own candidates many were called upon to do work for other lodges within and without their several Grand Jurisdictions. Even in normal times nearly every large lodge finds it necessary to devote at least three or four meetings each month to the conferring of degrees, and at their regular communications the entire evenings are usually taken up by the reception of and balloting on petitions and the examination of candidates for advancement, until but little opportunity is offered for sociability and the getting-together of the members, or enlightenment upon Masonic subjects.*

*Being aware of many of the various phases of the subject with which Brother Schoonover has had to meet during his term as Grand Master the editor has prevailed upon him to give to the readers of THE BUILDER the following editorial.*

*A further discussion of the subject will be found in the Fraternal Forum department of this issue of THE BUILDER.*

- EDITOR

EVIDENCE accumulated from many sources, during the year goes to prove the inherent difficulties of the large lodge. In many ways the large lodge fails, as a Masonic institution. It tends to become a highly centralized business institution. Its members, even after many years, become acquainted with but a fraction of the total roster. On funeral occasions the attendance is a handful, except in cases where the deceased brother was prominent in financial or political circles. Of sociability it has little except that which is purely formal. The reception of petitions becomes a burden. Witness the reception of 68 petitions in one evening by one of our lodges this year. The conferring of degrees obsesses the officers like a night-mare. Observe the announcement of one lodge that it would start to work on a certain day at 12:01 a. m. and close at 11:59 p.m. - with a temptation to set the clock back to conform to the law, so that the lectures might be given.

My correspondence file will prove every allegation I have made. It will reveal a lodge under the practical domination of a Secretary whose acts at least laid him under suspicion that his principal Masonic ideal was to perpetuate himself as Secretary at a salary of \$1200.00 per year (another \$1200.00 of salary being received from other "Masonic" bodies), and who, perhaps unthinkingly, was willing to besmirch the reputation of this Grand Lodge for fair dealing by insisting upon lodges in sister jurisdictions paying over their full fee for courtesy work. Why? Our sister jurisdictions feel in their hearts that it was so that he might make a good financial showing and perpetuate that salary.

Letters requesting permission to ballot upon petitions in groups have come to me. The conferring of sixteen degrees in the twenty-four hour session above referred to is, to my mind, an absolute travesty upon Masonry. No matter if the lodge was crowded with work, and trying to satisfy the ambition of brethren in khaki to receive their degrees before "going across" - I am not questioning the good faith of the lodge or its officers, for they were trying to meet a strenuous problem and could only do so in a wholesale way.

That such procedure should be necessary is but a symptom of the same disease which permeates our Fraternity too much. Elephantiasis - overgrowth - top-heaviness - these are the definitions attributed by some of my eminent friends over the country.

Our good Brother Pitts, of Palestine Lodge in Detroit, with 3,000 members, insists that the large lodge offers more to its membership than the small lodge, and under his energetic and unselfish leadership they have pretty nearly made good their opinion by their conduct of affairs. Contrast this situation with the average of 500 to 1,000 membership in Iowa and it is not to our credit, to say the least. And when it came to a discussion upon the floor, Palestine Lodge discussed, and if I remember correctly, asked the Grand Lodge of Michigan to permit, breaking it up into several groups, to be designated as "Palestine No. 1, No. 2, etc." They needed more degree teams.

This is only one of many remedies that have been proposed. I told the Master of the Lodge with the 68 petitions to ballot upon in one evening that I could not and would not relieve him or his lodge of the responsibility of passing upon the petitions one by one. To practically repeal the ballot law, by permitting joint balloting would not cure the evils, I am sure.

The advocates of the large lodge, and there are many such, base their opinion largely upon three affirmative propositions: (a) the opportunity to build a Masonic structure in the lives of our cities which, conforming to the city club idea, can theoretically perform a real Masonic service even in the highly congested life of the city which is worthy of the dignity of the Fraternity and wield an influence which will support the better side of civic institutions; (b) that in the large lodge there is an opportunity for a wider selection of officers, thereby attracting the men of larger abilities; (c) the greater per capita economy of doing things by means of which the large lodge can afford commodious and even luxuriant quarters at high rentals and meet the other necessary "overhead" expenses. They also advance at least two negative propositions: (a) that if a Grand Lodge attempts to legislate upon the subject in a restrictive way it is an "innovation" upon the body of Masonry; (b) that if restriction should be accomplished it should be done by the voluntary division of the lodge, by a "swarming off" process which will result in the formation of new lodges out of the parent lodge.

As I am, frankly, opposed to the large lodge, several answers to the above contentions occur to me. Even if the reasoning under (a) is true, it does not convince me that lodge activities of that particular kind are either necessary or in conformity with the real purposes of Masonry. Friendship and Brotherly Love are two of the most potent characteristics of a Masonic lodge pictured in the ideal, and I have never found that the club life of a great city was anything more than a poor substitute for the real thing as defined Masonically. In (b) it is true that the membership of the large lodge necessarily includes men of affairs and men of high mental attainments. But it is the remote case where men of such exceptional attainments as they refer to occupy the chairs. Why? Because the "line" system prevails, and a man who is by education and executive ability preeminently equipped to lead a lodge will not ordinarily accept the seven years of apprenticeship imposed upon those who would preside. When we bring the discussion down to the level of per capita economy we must also assume responsibility for the decreased efficiency of the lodge from the true Masonic standpoint. To clinch the argument, it is as it seems to me only necessary to point out that with anything like Masonic harmony prevailing, a group of small lodges, perhaps the groups which were once integral parts of the large lodge, could by cooperation and union of their resources perform any social or club function which a large lodge could.

The negative propositions advanced by those who believe in the large lodge are to be found equally unsound. The answer to the innovation argument is that the large lodge is itself an innovation; such cumbersome groups of brethren unacquainted with each other were never contemplated as Masonic. And the "swarming off" process, even when voluntarily attempted, as a rule, removes from the original organization only the fifteen or twenty brethren constitutionally necessary for the formation of a new lodge. A real division of the large lodge has never been accomplished within my knowledge.

To bring together the principal objections to the large lodge that form the real indictment, let us mention (a) the tendency to lay stress upon the business activities and the ritualistic work to the exclusion of all others; (b) the absence of real sociability and acquaintance among the members - the extent of this lack exhibiting itself in the indifference to a brother's welfare and a failure to love him enough to wish to follow him to his last resting place; (c) the wastage of all the energies of the officers in the degree mill, so that they have no opportunity or vim to perform other functions equally or even more important for the advancement of the causes for which our Fraternity should stand; (d) the large lodge gives the average member no opportunity to participate in its activities, all the time being taken up by routine work to the exclusion of addresses or lectures even if talent is available for this source of inspiration; (e) the Masonic development of each member is necessarily restricted; (f) even the opportunity to participate in the ritualistic work of the lodge is confined to a very small proportion of the total membership; and the pathway to the stations is too narrow for the progress of more than the few; (g) the individual member therefore feels a very small sense of responsibility for either the lodge or Masonry in general. As opposed to these things, the small lodge facilitates acquaintance, uses a larger proportion of its membership in the various activities, thereby generating the desire to know and the desire to serve in the hearts of all, promotes good fellowship, gives a more nearly equal chance for each member to become Worshipful Master (the ambition to preside over a lodge is a just and honorable one), and finally, the percentage of attendance in the small lodge is far higher than in the large one.

With those brethren who criticise our Grand Lodges for too much legislation I am inclined to agree, and the practical side of this question has been a matter of some concern. Various suggestions have been received. Some have felt that if we introduce a system of District Deputies these brethren could by persuasion and help bring about a voluntary readjustment of membership which would prove beneficial, and there is much weight to the argument. Others have proposed that it be made easier to form a new lodge, but I fail to see wherein our system in this respect could be materially simplified. The abolition of the system of line officers in the local lodges as has been done in this Grand Lodge might prove a help, and perhaps a law making an immediate past Warden ineligible for election would accomplish this result.

It has seemed to me, however, that the outright division of the large lodge into as many units as would make each lodge no larger than 200 members would be the only way in which to accomplish a uniform result. Perhaps to aspire to uniformity is wrong. But if each large lodge were to arrange its Past Masters in an alphabetical list, its Wardens likewise, and divide each list into the number of groups necessary for compliance with the general rule, and then alphabetically arrange and divide the brethren of the lodge in like manner, securing to all past officers their rights and honors and making provision for an equitable division and use of the lodge property, there should be no insuperable difficulties involved.

Automatically, when any one of the groups of 200, now of course independent lodges, would reach a membership of 400 it would again divide. No lodge would be obliged to cease working and no injustices would be done; in my opinion.

There is still another phase to this whole problem, and I find that another remedy finds its advocates. If, instead of dividing up large lodges, we should make group working - i.e. the conferring of degrees upon more than one candidate at one time, perhaps limiting the number to seven - legitimate, we might remove the objections to the large lodge, insofar, and only insofar, as congestion in the degree mill is concerned. Advocates of this plan advance the argument that the conferring of degrees upon classes has proven eminently successful in the Scottish Rite, and point to the higher efficiency of the individuals in the degree teams as more than offsetting the disadvantage which immediately occurs to some of us, insofar as the impression upon each candidate is concerned.

Have I made this review of the subject sufficiently explicit to justify the statement that we have here a problem which is vital, and worthy of our most careful study? Recommendations concerning the immediate settlement of the problem I shall not attempt. Put I do most earnestly recommend that a Commission of three or five members, chosen from some of our smaller lodges, join hands with three or five other brethren who are members of large city lodges to study this question in all its aspects, and make report at our next Annual Communication. The Commission should study the reports of the Special Deputy Grand Masters for this year, revealing as they do so clearly conditions in Iowa Masonry as they actually exist. They should advise with the brethren of other Jurisdictions who have given thought to this problem. They should consult with the Nebraska Commission appointed to review this subject, and who, I presume, will have a report at their June third Annual which will be available. The inquiry should be conducted in a brotherly spirit. If it can not arrive at a majority conclusion which will be acceptable to this Grand Lodge, then they should by all means recommend some practicable method of dividing responsibility in the large lodge, so that the necessary lodge functions may be carried out to the glory of Masonry. If the large lodge refuses to admit that it has any disease, then the representatives of the smaller lodges will have to diagnose the case for themselves, and apply some sort of a remedy to bring the larger lodges in harmony with the ideals which are at present largely the possession of the country lodge.

*G.L.S.*

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